

## Prioritizing Strategic Interests in South Asia

by Robert B. Oakley and T.X. Hammes

### Key Points

**The focus on the war in Afghanistan has prevented the United States from developing a South Asia strategy rooted in the relative strategic importance of the nations in the region. India, a stable democracy enjoying rapid growth, clearly has the most potential as a strategic partner. Pakistan, as the home of al Qaeda leadership and over 60 nuclear weapons, is the greatest threat to regional stability and growth. Yet Afghanistan absorbs the vast majority of U.S. effort in the region. The United States needs to develop a genuine regional strategy. This paper argues that making the economic growth and social reform essential to the stability of Pakistan a higher priority than the conflict in Afghanistan is a core requirement of such a strategy.**

For the last 8 years, the United States has focused its South Asia efforts primarily on Afghanistan. Despite repeated calls in U.S. strategic documents for a regional approach, the public debate has consistently returned to Afghanistan. During the Obama administration's lengthy 2009 policy review, public discussion narrowed even further to the single issue of troop strength. With the President's speech on December 1, the debate over the number of troops faded, only to be replaced by discussions about the proposed withdrawal

start date of July 2011 and the time necessary to deploy an additional 30,000 troops into Afghanistan. Obviously, the administration has just begun to implement its new plan, and the outcome remains uncertain. It will be years before we can determine if the new policy is successful.

Unfortunately, the focus on Afghanistan has prevented a serious discussion of a badly needed regional strategy for South Asia. Even discussions about "regional strategy" often examine how the United States can influence nations in the region to support its goals in Afghanistan. The discussion of regional strategy must be expanded to consider how to use scarce assets to meet U.S. goals across South Asia—in particular, stability and economic growth in Pakistan. Such a discussion cannot wait until Afghanistan has been resolved; the United States can develop and implement the basics of a strategy for South Asia that will be relevant no matter how the effort in Afghanistan turns out. Accordingly, this paper does not discuss the Afghan plan except where it needs to be modified to support U.S. efforts in Pakistan and India.

### Strategic Relevance

Any discussion of a U.S. regional strategy must start with an understanding of the

relative importance of the involved states to U.S. interests. India's population, economy, military power, and political influence make it the South Asian nation with the most potential as a strategic partner for the United States. Its current rapid economic growth and obvious potential mean India's strategic role will continue to grow both regionally and internationally. Its economy is almost 8 times the size of Pakistan's and 150 times the size of Afghanistan's.<sup>1</sup> While an extraordinarily complex political entity, India remains a stable state with growing military, particularly air and naval, power.

Conversely, Pakistan represents the greatest potential for damage to both the region and the United States. With a population of over 170 million, the country faces growing instability that is rooted in the extensive economic, political, social, and security failings embedded within its society. The government has repeatedly failed to address these issues, and potential solutions will challenge existing power structures within the country.

Pakistan is also the epicenter of Islamist extremism and home to al Qaeda's international leader, major elements of the Afghan Taliban, and several terrorist groups that are targeting India. If the growth of extremism is not checked in Pakistan, it has potential to

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cause real damage to the United States and its allies. Britain has close and repeated experience with the nexus between the extensive Pakistani diaspora and terror attacks. The recent arrest of five U.S. citizens in Pakistan on charges of terrorism shows that the United States is also vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, already more than 60 weapons, is steadily increasing in quantity and quality<sup>3</sup> and could fall into the wrong hands if radical Islamists—either insurgents or elements of the Pakistani army—take over or split the country. Because Pakistan is highly unlikely to give up its nuclear arsenal, the United States needs to work with the Pakistani government to find ways to reduce the risks of instability.

Finally, the long and tangled relationship between Pakistan and India means Pakistan represents the greatest immediate threat to India's security and continued economic growth. Most of Pakistan's defense program is focused on India, and Pakistani officers justify their support for both anti-Afghan Taliban and anti-Indian groups as an essential element of their strategic defense against India—the only country Pakistanis feel poses an existential threat to them. While Pakistan clearly has an interest in Afghanistan that is based on its Pashtun minority, its fundamental interest in Afghanistan is for “strategic depth” to reduce its vulnerability to Indian military power. Pakistani analysts have questioned this concept,<sup>4</sup> but as recently as February 2, 2010, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani publicly stated, “We want strategic depth in Afghanistan.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the current focus of U.S. efforts, Afghanistan is strategically the least important of the three countries to the United States. The core goal stated in the *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan* is “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan, and to prevent their return to Pakistan or Afghanistan.”<sup>6</sup> Open source

reporting indicates there are at most several hundred al Qaeda operatives currently in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the principal U.S. interest in Afghanistan has essentially ended, as al Qaeda central has moved its personnel and

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operations to Pakistan. Despite this success, Afghanistan continues to absorb by far the largest portion of international effort, yet its small population, extremely weak economy, and isolation give it little or no potential as a strategic partner for the United States.

Bruce Reidel, a senior administration advisor from the Brookings Institution, and other analysts have argued that al Qaeda's potential return to Afghanistan represents a real threat to the United States, and that Afghanistan therefore constitutes a critical vulnerability in South Asia.<sup>8</sup> However, a number of conditions must be met for this threat to materialize. First, the Taliban must seize enough of Afghanistan to provide secure bases from which al Qaeda can train and operate. Second, the Taliban must be unified enough to keep the area secure from both Northern Alliance and local Pashtun rivals. Third, the Taliban must invite al Qaeda back to Afghanistan. Fourth, al Qaeda must decide to leave its bases in Pakistan and return to Afghanistan.

A strong counterargument can be made that the first three assumptions are doubtful and that the fourth would actually benefit the U.S. counterterrorism effort. If al Qaeda returns to Afghanistan, its operatives will then have either to fly out of Afghanistan or return through Pakistan. The small number of flights out of Afghanistan will be much

easier to monitor than the huge number out of Karachi, and movement from Afghanistan to Pakistan will provide an additional opportunity for U.S. intelligence sources to find members of al Qaeda. In short, returning to Afghanistan will make it harder for al Qaeda operatives to leave their bases without being detected. Therefore, it is difficult to understand why al Qaeda would decide to shift its operations from Pakistan to Afghanistan regardless of the success of the Taliban.

And of course, if al Qaeda does return to Afghanistan, it will not mean a return to the pre-9/11 status quo. It is hard to imagine the United States will hesitate to conduct major air and even ground strikes in Afghanistan to disrupt al Qaeda operations. It is equally difficult to imagine the United States could ever conduct such aggressive operations into Pakistan.

### **Time to Shift Focus**

For a variety of reasons, U.S. actions before 2008 gave priority to Afghanistan. However, by mid-2008, the Bush administration began to identify the problems with this focus and moved toward a regional approach. The National Security Review of fall 2008<sup>9</sup> and the Obama administration Interagency Policy Group's White Paper of early 2009<sup>10</sup> each looked at U.S. strategic needs in terms of both the region and the global efforts against Islamist extremists. Despite the findings of these reviews, the U.S. public discussion and actions remained focused on Afghanistan.

The United States must set clear priorities and act in accordance with the reviews. Instead of the operational needs of the conflict in Afghanistan driving U.S. regional actions, U.S. strategic needs in the region should drive its actions in Afghanistan. This does not dictate an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan. It does require figuring out how to achieve our primary strategic ends in Afghanistan in ways that maximize regional stability. At the same time, we have to achieve our ends in Afghanistan within the limitations of the means we and our International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) allies are willing to provide. While the presence of large numbers of U.S. and ISAF personnel makes

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**Robert B. Oakley is a Distinguished Research Fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University, and former U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan. Dr. T.X. Hammes, a retired U.S. Marine Corps officer, is a Senior Research Fellow in INSS. Comments and questions may be directed to [thomas.hammes@ndu.edu](mailto:thomas.hammes@ndu.edu).**

an operational focus on Afghanistan understandable, it does not make it strategically sound. It is critical that our limited goals in Afghanistan do not define our regional strategy. Although U.S. forces were originally committed to destroy al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the continued presence of large U.S. and ISAF forces there impedes implementation of a regional strategy.

## U.S. Goals in Pakistan

The fundamental goals of U.S. strategy for Pakistan are clearly articulated in the *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on U.S. Policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*. They are to disrupt terrorist networks in Pakistan in order to degrade their ability to plan and launch international terrorist attacks; to assist efforts to enhance civilian control and stable constitutional government in Pakistan; to assist the Pakistani government in building a vibrant economy that provides opportunity for its people; and to involve the international community and the United Nations in helping Pakistan to attain these objectives.

To achieve these goals, the United States must take immediate short-term steps that will lay the basis for a long-term approach. One major obstacle that needs to be addressed is U.S. actions in Afghanistan that are having serious negative impacts on Pakistan.

## Pakistan: Sources of Instability

Pakistan would have significant internal stability issues even if the United States were not present in Afghanistan, but the conflict (and specific U.S. actions in prosecuting the war) aggravate the situation in several ways. By far the most serious fallout from the conflict in Afghanistan is the increasing radicalization of Pakistani society. The most visible outcome of that radicalization has been the steady increase in terror attacks in recent years.<sup>11</sup> This radicalization is driven by a number of factors—militant mul-lahs, fundamentalist madrassas, the failure of Pakistani society to alleviate the suffering of its population, and statements by military officials and provocation by politicians and

journalists. This shift is highlighted by some government officials openly supporting the presence of militant groups as well as allegations that the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) Agency is actively supporting some militants.

The increasingly influential extremist narrative focuses heavily on U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as U.S. demands that Pakistan support those efforts. While only one (and not the most important) of many factors driving the growth of radicalism, U.S. actions as well as its dialogue with Pakistani officials have provided a convenient focus for both the popular press and extremist

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propagandists. They also allow the Pakistani elites to distract attention from their failure to deal with Pakistan's problems.

Historically limited to the border areas, extremism has spread deep into Pakistan proper over the last few years. Extremist attacks have taken place in Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, and Multan. This trend is particularly worrying since four of these cities are in the Punjab and Sindh regions, which traditionally are isolated from anti-Pakistani radical movements. The extremists seem to be drawing upon sympathy in the region for anti-Indian radical movements such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM). Bombings and other terrorist actions have become commonplace not only against police and military targets but also against commercial and public infrastructure (the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, the army headquarters in Rawalpindi) and foreign targets (the U.S. Consulate in Karachi, the Sri Lankan cricket team).

The potential exists for even more serious terrorist attacks within Pakistan and an extension into large-scale civil disorders such as the Red Mosque siege in 2007. Of particular concern, many of the recent terror attacks inside Pakistan, including the October 2009 attack on the Pakistani army headquarters in

Rawalpindi, have been conducted by Punjabi radicals. Furthermore, multiple open source reports indicate the Taliban has a major presence in Karachi, the political and economic center of the Sindh region.<sup>12</sup> With a population of 18 million, over 1 million of whom are Pashtuns,<sup>13</sup> significant portions of the city lack any government presence. Compounding the problem, open source reporting indicates that, in response to threats of unilateral U.S. action, key leaders of the Quetta Shura are relocating to Karachi, perhaps with the unofficial support of Pakistani intelligence operatives. Here, as elsewhere in Pakistan, the interaction of extremist groups and established criminal networks is cause for concern. The series of recent attacks and Pakistani responses have shown the Pakistani police are extremely weak<sup>14</sup> and the Pakistani army is neither trained nor equipped for urban security operations.<sup>15</sup>

Severely complicating any efforts to improve the Pakistani army's counterinsurgency and urban warfare capabilities is the fact that it is being stretched thin by the widespread and effective insurgencies while concentrating on what the army regards as its core mission: readiness to fight India. In response to aggressive actions by the Taliban, the army conducted an offensive in South Waziristan and continues to try to pacify the Swat Valley as well as continuing combined Army/Frontier Corps operations against radicals in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). At the same time, it remains the primary agency dealing with the Baluch insurgency in the southwest.

This latest wave of Baluch separatism highlights increasing instability within Pakistan as well as the deep failure of its government. The insurgency is based on the government's long-term failure to use oil and gas revenues from the province to improve the lives of the Baluch and the more recent corruption and theft associated with the major construction of the port at Gwadar. As has been the case for decades, the Baluch feel that all benefits are flowing to the rest of Pakistan while they get nothing for the use of their land and resources.<sup>16</sup> In November 2009, in another of a long line of programs announced to undercut the insurgency, the Pakistani government rolled out "Aghaz-e-Haqooq Balochistan"—its

largest ever economic development package to the region.<sup>17</sup> While this will be a positive step if well executed, this plan will further stretch a civil government already struggling to rebuild Swat and South Waziristan.

A second dangerous product of U.S. actions in Afghanistan is the strident anti-American sentiment that dominates Pakistani public opinion. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit in October 2009 was an impressive display of public diplomacy. Yet even with her adept handling of a hostile Pakistani press and frank discussions in town hall meetings, the long-term effects of her visit will be very limited. The Pakistani anger and distrust on display during the visit are reflected in recent polling data. In the August 2009 International Republican Institute poll, only 2 percent of Pakistanis felt that Pakistan had a good relationship with the United States.<sup>18</sup>

Within a semi-democratic government, this is particularly disturbing—as is the fact that the anti-American sentiment has seeped into the mid and lower ranks of the Pakistani army. The danger is amplified by the inability of a weak president, even by Pakistani standards (23 percent approval rating in late September 2009),<sup>19</sup> to exert any control over the army. There have also been highly public disputes between President Asif Ali Zardari and the army, such as the one precipitated by Zardari's statement that Pakistan renounced first use of nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the fall of 2009, Pakistani newspapers openly speculated on whether Zardari would be able to serve out his term of office.<sup>21</sup> Such speculation increased in November when Zardari announced he was passing control of the nuclear weapons to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.<sup>22</sup> His late January 2010 flurry of campaign-like visits around the country shows it is too soon to count Zardari out, but he remains a seriously weakened president.

The most widely publicized U.S. actions that elicit a negative Pakistani reaction are drone strikes into Pakistan. Some open source reporting indicates senior Pakistani officials have approved the strikes<sup>23</sup> (particularly since the Taliban started their offensive out of Swat). Yet the popular press in Pakistan is vociferously opposed to what many Pakistanis believe is a violation of Pakistani sovereignty. This reflects the attitudes of the

vast majority of Pakistanis; major polls show that between 75 and 90 percent of Pakistanis oppose the drone attacks.<sup>24</sup> The English language Pakistani press has consistently condemned the attacks. Even respected U.S. counterinsurgency experts have condemned them as counterproductive to efforts to stabilize Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> Despite the negative impacts, the Obama administration reportedly authorized increased drone strikes into Pakistan

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through 2009<sup>26</sup> as well as a dramatic flurry of attacks following the December 31, 2009, suicide bombing of the Central Intelligence Agency base.

Complicating our relationship with Pakistan is the tone of public communications between U.S. senior officials and those of the Pakistani government and army. Until very recently, the most consistent element of U.S. dialogue with Pakistan has been demands for Pakistani actions to assist U.S. efforts against the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda. For instance, Bruce Reidel recently wrote:

*Washington needs to be clear with Pakistan that the Quetta Shura needs to be shut down permanently. For far too long, Pakistan has tolerated the Afghan Taliban leadership's presence in Quetta and other parts of Pakistan. Now that Pakistan is finally taking action against its own Pakistani Taliban, it needs to take on Mullah Omar and his Shura council as well.*<sup>27</sup>

In October 2009, Secretary Clinton publicly chastised Pakistan for not doing more to kill or capture senior al Qaeda leaders living in the country.<sup>28</sup> On December 7, the *New*

*York Times* stated that National Security Advisor James Jones informed the Pakistanis that the United States will increase Predator attacks into Pakistan and, if need be, resume unilateral ground actions.<sup>29</sup> Yet the use of ground forces on Pakistan's soil will create even greater public hostility than the drone strikes. The September 2008 U.S. ground raid in Sana generated a specific warning by General Ashfaq Kiyani that Pakistan would defend its territorial integrity at all costs.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, these statements have typified the U.S. dialogue with Pakistan. Despite statements in strategic documents, U.S. actions make it clear that the United States sees Afghanistan as much more important than Pakistan. The fact that the United States is spending 30 times as much in Afghanistan and dedicating massive political capital and personnel resources to that effort reinforces this point. At the same time, the Pakistanis see that our political commitment to Afghanistan is under political attack at home. President Obama's announcement that July 2011 would be the start date for the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, combined with the nature of the long-term, off-and-on relationship, reinforces Pakistani fears that the United States will turn its back on Pakistan if it once again loses interest in Afghanistan.

Congressional statements and actions have also reinforced Pakistani belief in the transactional nature of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Frustrated with the long record of Pakistani abuse of U.S. civilian aid, Congress inserted language in the aid package of \$7.5 billion to closely monitor its use, which came under harsh criticism in Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Of particular concern, the protests were supported, and at times publicly led, by senior Pakistani officials. According to a major Pakistani newspaper, "General Kayani told General McChrystal that like the Pakistani people, the military and intelligence services were furious at the observations made on Pakistan's security establishment in the Kerry-Lugar Bill."<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting the predominant sentiment of his countrymen, former President of Pakistan Farooq Leghari stated the Kerry-Lugar Bill (Pakistan Enduring Assistance and Cooperation Enhancement of 2009) was a "supreme example of the servility and



shamelessness of our top-most leadership who secretly aided and acquiesced in the unbearable presumptions, language and conditional ties that leave Pakistan in the dock of a country whose armed forces and ISI stand accused and 'proven guilty' of initiating, aiding and abetting terrorism."<sup>33</sup>

While instability in Pakistan is firmly rooted in its own longstanding political, economic, social, and religious conflicts, U.S. actions exacerbate that instability. For the last 18 months, key leaders in the U.S. executive and legislative branches have been attempting to establish a regional strategy, but events in Afghanistan continue to focus discussion on operational questions of troop levels and withdrawal dates. However, U.S. strategic priorities, as stated in the March 2009 Afghanistan-Pakistan White Paper, dictate that we should evaluate whether even actions that help in Afghanistan are a good idea if they destabilize Pakistan. Unfortunately, U.S. political leaders and field commanders are focused primarily on Afghanistan. To date, this focus on mostly tactical details has resulted in the United States downplaying the heavily negative Pakistan perceptions of its actions in Afghanistan. General David Petraeus noted that Afghanistan and Pakistan have "merged into a single problem set."<sup>34</sup> The authors believe this is true but think the United States has its priorities wrong. The relative strategic importance of the two nations means we should shift our focus to promoting stability and economic growth in Pakistan and ensuring our actions in Afghanistan are not having a negative effect in Pakistan.

During his January 2010 trip to Pakistan, Defense Secretary Robert Gates indicated the administration's approach to the country may be shifting. His public statements focused on the long-term nature of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship and Pakistan's issues rather than the normal expressions of unhappiness with the effort Pakistan is making to help the United States. He directly addressed the "deficit of trust," common interests, and the extent of Pakistan's efforts to date.<sup>35</sup> Secretary Gates's visit was a positive first step in refocusing the relationship. The key will be to sustain this strategic focus on Pakistani stability

and avoid returning to the previous focus on tactical details in Afghanistan.

## Short-term Actions

A critical first step is acknowledging the Pakistani army's vital role in the most important issues, including control of the country's nuclear arsenal, national budget, the actions of the ISI, the level of the conflict with the Islamic radicals and al Qaeda within Pakistan, the Pakistan-Afghan border, policy toward India and Iran, and the presence or absence of a civil government. While the United States must continue to clearly support the Pakistani civilian government, we must also realize that it will be a decade or more before Pakistan can develop the institutions essential to an effective civil government. Like it or not, the United States will have to continue to work with and through the Pakistani army to achieve our goals. U.S. officials will have to maintain a strong, private dialogue with Pakistan's army leadership to ensure that our willingness to work with them is not interpreted as condoning the army's support for radical groups.

The most important short-term step the United States can take is to stop doing things that further destabilize Pakistan. It should cease unilateral drone attacks against targets in the country. Although these are touted as important to our effort in Afghanistan, the Taliban are adjusting to make them less effective. In fact, the attacks seem to be driving the Taliban, and potentially al Qaeda, deeper into Pakistan. At the same time, the increasing number of attacks is hardening anti-American attitudes in Pakistan. In short, the key question is whether the damage we are causing the Afghan Taliban is worth seeing them move deeper into Pakistan. Are we increasing instability in Pakistan for dubious results in Afghanistan?

The constant drumbeat of senior U.S. officials demanding Pakistani action against the Afghan Taliban is both negative and futile. As long as Pakistani leaders are convinced that the relationship with the United States is transactional and that India remains their biggest threat, they see little strategic sense in attacking the Afghan Taliban. The United States should replace public insis-

tence with quiet discussions between senior U.S. and Pakistani leaders that will be just as effective as the current demands without the negative impact on public opinion in Pakistan. The tone of Secretary Gates's remarks during his January trip is a positive sign that the U.S. approach is changing, as are the continuing efforts by Admiral Michael Mullen to strengthen U.S.-Pakistan relations. While it is too early for definitive analysis, Pakistan's arrest of top Taliban military commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar as well as four Taliban shadow governors in February 2010 suggested this quieter approach was paying dividends. However, as more information

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became available, the reasons for the arrests and their political impact have become a subject of debate.

The United States should also cease public demands for Pakistani actions against al Qaeda. After 8 years, the Pakistani leaders have no doubt that U.S. leaders place a great deal of importance on destroying al Qaeda in Pakistan. They have turned over large numbers of al Qaeda members to the United States. Additional public demands are unlikely to produce any more action, but they do reinforce the Pakistani belief that the U.S. interest in Pakistan is purely based on attacking al Qaeda. Once again, private discussions can be used in their place.

In the last several months, U.S. officials have stopped demanding that Pakistan do more to control movement across the border with Afghanistan. This is a positive step. These demands irritate Pakistanis who ask why the United States, as a superpower, does not do more to control movement from the Afghan side to support Pakistan's fight against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistani officers note that they maintain 821 border posts on the Pakistan-Afghanistan

border while ISAF maintains only 112. U.S. public demands produce no results but appear to Pakistanis to be both unjust and infeasible, further reinforcing the belief that the United States is using Pakistan.

The United States must also consider whether its actions inside Afghanistan create problems in Pakistan. For instance, the U.S. counternarcotics program is focusing on destroying the high-level networks inside Afghanistan. Yet given that the potential for profit from drugs remains, these networks (and their accompanying negative impact) probably will just move to Pakistan. Similarly, some of our tactical actions are driving insurgent elements across the border into Pakistan, which is clearly not helpful for Pakistan stability. Given the relative strategic importance of the two nations, actions taken in Afghanistan must be evaluated by their impact on Pakistan and be rejected if that impact is too negative.

The United States must also maintain the positive steps it has initiated. Despite the initial negative public reaction, the Kerry-Lugar Bill makes Pakistan the second largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world. Pakistan needs this aid to prevent economic collapse. The United States should continue this aid while working quietly to improve transparency in how it is used.

The Pentagon should maintain its support for Pakistani armed forces counterinsurgency efforts. This will require reassuring India, since much of the equipment used in counterinsurgency also has application in conventional fights. As the most basic step, the United States must continue to expedite the delivery of training, weapons, equipment, and fuel requested by the Pakistanis to fight the Taliban. The mid-October 2009 visit of General Petraeus appeared to be a first step in that direction. We must sustain and, if needed, increase that flow of resources.

Diplomatically, the administration should continue frequent visits by senior U.S. officials. In addition to highlighting our long-term interests in Pakistan, these visits are appropriate venues for privately conveying Washington's view that the Taliban represent a growing threat to Pakistan. They should not be used to demand Pakistani action to

support ISAF. Such demands simply reinforce beliefs that the United States seeks only Pakistan's help and not its wealth.

As part of these visits, U.S. officials should continue private demands for Pakistani action against the anti-India Taliban (LeT and associated groups) as part of continuing efforts to reduce India-Pakistan tensions. In these discussions, officials must highlight why the United States thinks actions by these terror groups are the most likely trigger for major war in the region and stress the negative impact on Pakistan. Furthermore, U.S. officials must make the point that both the United States and Europeans perceive these groups (particularly LeT) as potential direct threats to our interests. Finally, discussions should highlight

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that restraining attacks is necessary to allay Indian concerns about closer U.S.-Pakistan security cooperation.

Preferably working through civilian agencies, the United States should continue to provide resources to help Pakistan repair the damage to the Tribal Areas, Swat, and Waziristan caused by the offensive against the Taliban. However, for better or worse, the army has historically been the Pakistani government's equivalent of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Thus, in the short term, the United States will have to work through the Pakistani army. Given the enormous political as well as humanitarian fallout from recent military operations, the importance of large-scale, rapid assistance to and through the Pakistani army is critical.

At the same time, the United States must recognize and generously support efforts by Pakistani nongovernmental organizations and international relief organizations such

as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross. However it delivers the aid, Washington should adopt a low profile in light of the political sensitivities. For instance, the United States can airlift relief supplies to airfields, but distribution should be carried out by Pakistani army and international relief organizations without obtrusive U.S. supervision. The United States will have to use other methods to minimize the diversion of the aid.

The administration should increase the number of seats for Pakistani officers and senior civilians in our training and education programs within the United States. The imposition of the Pressler Amendment in 1990 reduced the number of Pakistanis who attended U.S. schools and left a gap in the personal relationships between military leaders of the two nations. The United States has been working hard to restore those programs, but these efforts are complicated by Pakistan's inability and/or unwillingness to fill the additional billets. The United States must do its best to smooth the process.

Finally, to reinforce its message of trust, the Obama administration must continue to consult with Pakistan on its strategy for Afghanistan-Pakistan despite the obvious difficulties involved.

These steps focus primarily on improving our relationship with the Pakistani army, the critical actor in the near to medium term. At the same time, we must continue efforts to improve our relationship with the civilian elements of Pakistan's government as well as improve their performance.

## **Long-term Actions**

The most important long-term step the United States can take in resetting regional strategy is to change the basic nature of its relationship with Pakistan. From the beginning, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship has been transactional, with each side seeking quid pro quo returns for its actions. Over the last 60 years, the U.S. relationship with Pakistan has been driven by U.S. interests in other nations—primarily the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. For its part, Pakistan has

consistently exploited U.S. interests in the region to obtain aid.

In the early 1950s, the United States supported Pakistan as part of efforts to contain the Soviet Union. Pakistan benefited from the delivery of U.S. weapons and aid, but it turned to China when the United States failed to back Pakistan in its 1965 conflict with India. After a brief reconciliation in the late 1960s, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship suffered heavily when Pakistan lost the eastern half of its country due to India's intervention in the Pakistan civil war in 1971. By joining the Central Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization with U.S. encouragement, Pakistan felt it was establishing a strategic partnership with the United States. In the Pakistani version of history, the United States betrayed Pakistan by not actively supporting it in its 1965 and 1971 wars with India. The sense of betrayal, right or wrong, was exacerbated in April 1979 when the Jimmy Carter administration imposed sanctions in response to Pakistan's nuclear program.

In December 1979, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States abruptly reversed its position to gain Pakistan's assistance in driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan. Once the Soviets withdrew, the relationship again faded. As soon as it no longer needed Pakistan, the United States not only withdrew support but ended waivers of the Pressler Amendment in October 1989, cutting off all aid, government arms sales, and personnel exchanges as well as stopping the delivery of 28 F-16s for which Pakistan had already paid \$658 million.<sup>36</sup> The United States also left Pakistan to support the millions of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and to deal with the continued instability on its border. After 9/11, when the United States needed Pakistani airspace and lines of transportation, Washington was once again eager to have Islamabad as an ally.<sup>37</sup>

In each case, the U.S. interest was clearly limited to an immediate goal. It is little wonder that Pakistani leaders expect current intense U.S. interest in Pakistan to fade when our operations in Afghanistan draw down. In the wake of President Obama's December 2009 speech, they see that happening sooner rather than later.

## Change the Relationship

In light of the major changes in the strategic landscape of South Asia, it is time for the United States to deal with Pakistan based on long-term U.S. interest in its stability rather than simply as an addendum to other agendas. Changing this relationship will require the United States to take a consistent approach to Pakistan over time—certainly many years, if not decades. Given the nature of past relations, Pakistani leaders will be skeptical. The key problem will be providing a convincing reason why Washington seeks a long-term relationship with Islamabad. In fact, the reason is simple. The United States seeks stability to ensure the long-term security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, which it is not giving up; therefore, U.S. concerns (and the need for a positive relationship) will be lasting. While nuclear weapons are not the only important U.S. strategic interest in Pakistan, they are the most credible and enduring reason for a shift from a transactional policy to sustained engagement.

The first step in convincing Pakistan that our relationship is important and enduring is to make it clear that we view Afghanistan primarily through its impact on our regional interests. We have to stop treating Afghanistan as the most important nation in the region. The United States should emphasize the contributions a positive U.S.-Pakistan relationship makes to U.S. strategic goals. We will also have to address Pakistan's number-one security concern: India. There is no quick solution to the generations of mistrust between these two nations, but the United States can play an important role in initial confidence-building steps. After Prime Minister Yousuf Gilani repeatedly called for a resumption of talks with India, which suspended the Composite Dialogue talks until Pakistan took action against the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks,<sup>38</sup> India agreed to a meeting of foreign ministers in February 2010. The meeting was only a hesitant first step, but the United States should use its good offices and influence with both sides to encourage the continuation of these talks while making it clear to all that the United States is not taking sides but merely encouraging serious negotiations.

The United States also needs to rethink and then drastically revise its civilian assistance to Pakistan. As recent polls show, these efforts have not achieved any traction with the Pakistani public. More emphasis needs to be placed on the basic, but very difficult, issues of land reform, public education, and public health. In much of Pakistan, a feudal system still exists, which has toxic effects on productivity and development. The education

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and health systems have suffered from government neglect, which undercuts Pakistan's economic potential and popular support for the government. These issues will require a long-term approach. They will also require funding—to purchase land for redistribution and to restore health and education systems. Although Pakistan has proven reluctant to spend its own funds on land reform, education, or public health, it has been willing to allow international donors to invest in those areas. Whatever the source of the funds, the United States must anticipate that these necessary initiatives will face resistance from powerful elements in Pakistan.

Even though we will have to work primarily through the Pakistani army and international aid organizations to provide relief for the immediate crises, we must simultaneously work at building a civilian response organization within the Pakistani government that can put a civilian government face on relief efforts.

Another requirement for improving Pakistan's economic future is the development of more effective local governments. This needs to be a consistent element of dialogue with our Pakistani counterparts. While



the United States cannot insist on any particular form of governance, it must make clear that it will support Pakistani efforts to improve the delivery of services at the local level through local governments.

As in most developing countries, rule of law is weak in Pakistan. We must push firmly but quietly for reform of the entire justice system to include courts, police, and prisons. The Pakistanis have already taken the initial steps on judicial reform with the return of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad

## **the situation in South Asia may provide new opportunities for cooperation between Iran and the United States that further both nations' interests**

Chaudhry and the dismissal of politicized judges appointed by Presidents Pervez Musharraf and Zardari. These actions received high levels of public approval. Thus, a U.S. offer to support a serious, long-term multinational program to improve Pakistan's justice system should be acceptable to most Pakistanis—although it will be resisted by powerful elements that see such change as threatening their interests.

A critical element of judicial reform is police reform. Police training has been the cornerstone of the U.S. approach in Iraq and Afghanistan, but there has been no parallel effort in Pakistan. Yet Pakistan badly needs a professional police force to control its rising domestic terrorist and criminal threats. This has been and remains a major failing of vision by the United States. Fortunately, unlike Iraq or Afghanistan, Pakistan has an existing police system that can form the basis of an improved police force. Rather than direct involvement, the United States should encourage and fund other nations such as Turkey and Jordan to assist with Pakistani police training. This would allow Pakistan's government to avoid the taint of direct U.S. involvement while having access to additional resources and expertise. A

similar approach would be appropriate for Pakistan's prison system.

Finally, as part of this confidence-building, the United States should encourage stronger links between Pakistan and Afghanistan and strengthen the relationships between Pakistani and Afghan leaders by building upon the May 2009 three-way talks in Washington. While Zardari and Hamid Karzai have started the process, it can only be sustained with U.S. assistance—and must be focused as much on Pakistan's issues as those of Afghanistan and the United States. The Obama administration should make it clear to Congress that it will oppose any conditions on military assistance to Pakistan.

The key is to build a relationship between the United States and Pakistan based on long-term interest rather than transactional quid pro pro. Given the huge trust deficit on both sides, this will be a difficult and time-consuming process. Nor does it guarantee a positive outcome. Changing the nature of the relationship will not likely have a decisive impact on internal Pakistani politics. Rather, by making it clear to Pakistanis that the United States seeks a long-term relationship, it can have a positive influence on the Pakistani elite who will determine the country's future. The ongoing transactional relationship reduces U.S. relevance simply because the key players in Pakistan believe Washington will lose interest and turn away upon withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## **India**

In keeping with a regional strategy that focuses on stability and growth for the region, the United States must engage India bilaterally. Instability in Pakistan poses a greater threat to India than any other nation, and the Indians recognize this. Defense Minister A.K. Anthony stated, "The threat of nuclear weapons falling into [the] wrong hands remains an area of serious concern and consequences of such a situation are unimaginable."<sup>39</sup> India is also clearly interested in a deeper relationship with the United States, which should use this opportunity to engage the Indians in its efforts to bring stability to the region. As

Secretary Gates noted in his January visit, India has shown remarkable restraint in dealing with Pakistan-supported terrorist attacks. The U.S. effort can build on this by initiating small steps to improve Pakistan-India relations, such as resuming the dialogue over a broad range of issues (trade, travel, military confidence-building, and Kashmir) and encouraging steps to increase bilateral cooperation on practical issues.

The resumption of India-Pakistan talks on February 25 was a critical step. These talks have great potential to benefit both countries—particularly Pakistan. Already they have made limited progress with discussions on authorizing two-way truck traffic between Afghanistan and India. Effective talks that lead to regional trade could be an engine to pull Pakistan out of its economic morass. In turn, Pakistan should be prepared to allow its territory to be used for an India-Iran gas and oil pipeline. Pakistan will benefit not only from the increased availability of energy but also from the \$1 billion in annual transit fees such a pipeline would generate.

Building trust between these two adversaries will take time and will require U.S. efforts and Indian cooperation to ease Pakistani suspicions about Indian strategic goals. In turn, Pakistan must be persuaded to cease support to Islamist radical attacks upon India.

Pakistan-India hostility will challenge U.S. efforts to maintain good relations with both nations. But India cannot succeed in its regional and global ambitions if Pakistan fails. While India holds great economic promise and will be a major player in global affairs, Pakistan's instability and growing extremism make it a significant threat to both U.S. and Indian interests and security. Therefore, it is in both nations' strategic interest to engage with Pakistan in an effort to stabilize the country and assist it onto the path of economic growth. We must make it clear to the Indians that our investment in Pakistan is an investment in regional, and therefore Indian, security.

## **Iran**

Pakistan's relationship with Iran is an important, overlooked issue in discussions of

South Asia. In the 1990s, Pakistan and Iran had a very close relationship, with the former helping Iran to develop its nuclear program and Iran helping Pakistan with its petroleum sector.<sup>40</sup> This relationship continues because Pakistan and Iran continue to share serious economic (energy) and security (Baluchistan) interests, as well as points of potential conflict such as the status of Pakistan's Shia minority. The situation in South Asia may also provide new opportunities for cooperation between Iran and the United States that further both nations' interests.

Iran has made significant investments in Afghanistan to include improving the road connections between the port of Char Behar and the Ring Road. According to the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, Iran has disbursed nearly a half-billion dollars in aid since 2001.<sup>41</sup> Iran is continuing to invest in western Afghanistan, and Iranian businessmen are establishing significant trade links with Afghans. Furthermore, Iran needs an outlet for its energy resources, while Pakistan and India both need natural gas badly. Thus, a potential gas pipeline across Pakistan could be a win for all three nations as well as increasing the global natural gas supply.

## Other Regional Actors

The United States must build upon the April 2009 Pakistan Donor Conference by developing a permanent contact group of regional governments that are imperiled by extremists. We should encourage bilateral and multilateral discussion between and among India, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as well as the European Union and Japan. These nations should engage in the political as well as the economic realm. Each has assets it can bring to the table. The Saudis can provide both money and political-religious support. China has extensive security and economic relations with Pakistan. Iran was very helpful to U.S. efforts in pulling together a post-Taliban government in Afghanistan but was later rebuffed by Washington. It has the potential to stop helping the Taliban extremists as well as the Shia groups in Pakistan.

While the United States cannot expect open cooperation from some of these nations,

it can conduct quiet diplomacy that encourages other nations to act in support of their own interest in regional stability.

## Costs, Benefits, and Risks

The financial costs of the steps recommended above would be in the low tens of billions over a period of a decade or more—a fraction of our current open-ended investment in Afghanistan. Moreover, the potential for the loss of human life is relatively low, particularly in comparison to our recent efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, there will be some significant political costs. The first will be the domestic political cost of removing public pressure on Pakistan to do something about Taliban sanctuaries. The authors believe this threat is overstated. The United States has effectively admitted it cannot control the Pakistan-Afghanistan border

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and has even gone as far as to remove some of the isolated outposts along that border. It is doubtful that the Pakistani army has the capacity to achieve border control when ISAF failed to do so. Even if the Pakistani army should move to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries, the Taliban can then move back across the border into Afghan territory outside government control. In short, while chastising Pakistan publicly for failing to eliminate Taliban sanctuaries makes for good political theater, actually closing those sanctuaries would simply cause the Taliban to move to Afghanistan.

Since it supported the rise of the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan has acted as if it represents a major strategic asset against India. The Afghan Taliban represent a valued

Pakistani ally inside Afghanistan—particularly since many Pakistanis perceive the Karzai government to be a friend of India rather than Pakistan. If Pakistan continues to regard the Afghan Taliban this way, it will provide them shelter and support no matter what the United States says. Although the reasons behind Pakistan's mid-February 2010 seizures of Mullah Baradar (the Taliban's second in command) and the shadow governors of Kunduz, Baghlan, Laghman, and Zabul are unclear, there is hope the actions indicate a shift in Pakistan's view of the Afghan Taliban. Bruce Reidel seemed cautiously optimistic when he noted, "I believe the Pakistanis have finally concluded that the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan Taliban were cooperating against them in Waziristan and elsewhere."<sup>42</sup>

The authors do not believe the Pakistanis have irrevocably decided that the Afghan Taliban pose a major danger to the Pakistani state. Thus, the United States should continue a quiet dialogue with Pakistani leaders and share any intelligence that proves the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are working together to destabilize Pakistan. Ultimately, the most likely source of an enduring shift in Pakistani policy toward the Afghan Taliban is continued radical attacks inside Pakistan; such attacks would convince Pakistani leaders that the Afghan Taliban are in fact working with the Pakistani Taliban against the Pakistan government. U.S. observers must remain alert for indications the recent arrests are tactical in nature and do not represent a fundamental shift in policy.

Another cost would be reduced effectiveness of international sanctions on Iran. If the United States supports an energy pipeline to move Iranian gas across Pakistan to India, it will be very difficult to keep arguing that other nations should join in sanctions to convince Iran not to develop nuclear weapons. However, the lack of international consensus on the need for severe sanctions indicates the United States will lose little if it reduces efforts to impose international sanctions. Essentially, the decision comes down to which actions would have a higher strategic payoff: efforts to impose sanctions to prevent Iran from getting its first nuclear weapons,

or support for a pipeline and subsequent economic growth in Pakistan, owner of many nuclear weapons.

India will certainly object to some of the actions we propose. Senior U.S. leaders will have to argue that these actions are balanced steps necessary to ensure stability inside Pakistan. India is fully aware of the exceptional threat the Pakistani nuclear arsenal represents in the wrong hands. It has shown great restraint in dealing with the terror attacks and displayed strategic vision in working to develop its relationship with Pakistan. And of course, U.S. efforts to support an Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline would provide major economic benefits for India.

The primary risk to long-term efforts to improve Pakistan's economic and political structures lies in the fact that many of the current power holders see any change as a threat to their power. Although happy to accept U.S. aid, some will resist the political and social changes necessary to ensure long-term economic growth in Pakistan. The challenge for U.S. policy is to work with the current power brokers in the near term while supporting those elements of Pakistani society who understand that failure to change will result in long-term economic decline and increasing instability. A secondary risk to U.S. efforts is the fact that this approach will take a long time to produce results. The American people may not be willing to sustain even relatively small additional commitments in the face of rising national debt and deteriorating U.S. infrastructure.

Major instability in Pakistan and the potential for Islamic radicals to seize control of part or all of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal represent the greatest threats to the United States emanating from South Asia. Yet the heavy U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the resulting operational focus have distorted U.S. regional strategy to the point where it focuses on Afghanistan even when actions taken there harm more important U.S. interests in Pakistan. It is time for the United States to reevaluate its overall interests in the region and shift its focus to fostering stability in Pakistan.

The benefits to this proposed approach clearly outweigh the costs. Pakistan represents the greatest danger to regional stabil-

ity. The existence of its nuclear arsenal means that regardless of the outcome in Afghanistan, we need to support measures that contribute to internal stability in Pakistan. Focusing on economic growth and political reform is the most effective action the United States can take to ensure that nuclear weapons do not fall into the hands of Islamist radicals, whether insurgents or radicalized elements of the Pakistani government. Further, by starting these actions now, the Obama administration improves its ability to sustain them when we start our withdrawal from Afghanistan—whenever that might be.

Efforts to change the transactional nature of the Pakistan-U.S. relationship will take a long time and at best permit the United States a moderate positive influence in the reforms essential for the economic growth and stability of Pakistan. The steps outlined in this paper suggest a low-cost but high-payoff approach to the bilateral relationship that can change the U.S. influence from an intermittent and usually negative factor to a long-term positive role in Pakistan's internal political struggle for reform. The recommendations would have only minimal impact on operations in Afghanistan and, because of the threat represented by the enduring presence of nuclear weapons in Pakistan, are necessary regardless of what happens there.

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